بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

ISSN 0178-6288

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Norman_Khalaf-Prinz_Sakerfalke_Von_Jaffa/publications

https://palestine.academia.edu/ProfDrScNormanAliBassamAliTaherKhalaf

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الغزال : النشرة الفلسطينية لعلم الأحياء

Gazelle : The Palestinian Biological Bulletin

Gazelle : Das Palästinensische Biologische Bulletin

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Volume 44 – Number 237 – January 2026

Published by Prof. Dr. Norman Ali Khalaf Department for Environmental Research and Media, National Research Center, University of Palestine, Gaza, State of Palestine

دائرة البروفيسور نورمان خلف لأبحاث البيئة

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A Rare Catch of a Whale Shark (*Rhincodon typus* A. Smith, 1828) off the Khan Younis Coast, Southern Gaza Strip: The Second Record from the Palestinian Mediterranean Coast

By: Sharif Hajji Prof. Dr. Sc. Norman Ali Bassam Ali Taher Bin Mostafa Khalaf-Prinz Sakerfalke von Jaffa

A whale shark (*Rhincodon typus* A. Smith, 1828) is surrounded by hundreds of Gazans at Khan Younis Coast, Southern Gaza Strip, Palestine, on Friday 17.10.2025.

On Friday 17th October 2025, Palestinian fishermen managed to catch a **Whale Shark (*Rhincodon typus* A. Smith, 1828)** off the Khan Younis Coast, Southern Gaza Strip, State of Palestine, East Coast of the Mediterranean Sea.
Officially it was not clear if the whale shark was caught by the Gazan fishermen in the narrow permitted fishing zone, or it was washed ashore.

Videos on Facebook were showing the circa 8-10 meters long and ca. 2 tonnes whale shark pulled ashore with thick ropes, and was surrounded by hundreds of displaced and hungry Gazans at the Khan Younis beach. Subsequently, the whale shark was butchered for food on spot, and meat was distributed on spot, in the famine declared Gaza Strip.

The circa 8-10 meters long and ca. 2 tonnes whale shark was pulled ashore with thick ropes at Khan Younis Beach, Southern Gaza Strip, Palestine, on Friday 17.10.2025.

The whale shark named “Ofek” had been observed since the end of September 2025 swimming north and south along the Palestinian coast, off the coasts of Umm Khalid (Netanya), Isdud (Ashdod), ‘Asqalan (Ashkelon), Bat Yam, Jaffa and Sheikh Mu'annis (Tel Aviv).

Whale sharks are listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List, and their populations are currently decreasing. They face a range of threats, including vessel strikes, bycatch, fisheries, finning, tourism, and climate change.

According to the Israeli news website “Ynet”, Dr. Adi Barash, CEO of the Israel Shark Association, confirmed that it was a whale shark. "Ecologically, this doesn't really matter since it's a single shark. It's best not to delve into what happened. It just makes me sad," Barash commented (Agenzia Nova News, 17.10.2025).

The circa 8-10 meters long and ca. 2 tonnes whale shark was pulled ashore with thick ropes at Khan Younis Beach, Southern Gaza Strip, Palestine, on Friday 17.10.2025. For a brief moment, cheers and wonder replaced fear and hunger a rare glimpse of joy in a land that has endured so much pain.

The circa 8-10 meters long and ca. 2 tonnes whale shark was pulled ashore with thick ropes at Khan Younis Beach, Southern Gaza Strip, Palestine, on Friday 17.10.2025.

Fishermen in Gaza rely on the sea as their primary source of livelihood, to feed their families and sell their catch in the markets. They don't catch, eat or sell endangered fish, and they respect the sea and marine life. But difficult economic conditions, and the Israeli sea blockade on the Gaza Strip since 2007, and the famine that occurred after the Gaza war since 2023, forced the people to eat any meat available.

The Gazans expressed their joy at catching this huge fish, considering it an unexpected livelihood in light of the difficult humanitarian conditions and food scarcity, as a result of the Israeli occupation siege, which limited fishermen's access to rich fishing areas.
The catching of the whale shark in Khan Younis reflects the complex situation in the Gaza Strip, where the Gazans' urgent need for food collides with international concern about protecting endangered marine species.

From an environmental perspective, the whale shark is considered the largest and most important fish species in the world and plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance of the marine ecosystem, making its capture a subject of criticism and concern among environmental organizations. While Palestinian voices highlight the dire conditions that sometimes drive fishermen to not adhere to environmental protection regulations due to the Israeli sea blockade (since 2007), restrictions on fishing, and the famine that occurred after the Gaza War (since 2023).

The whale shark was butchered for food on spot, and meat was distributed on spot, at Khan Younis Beach, Southern Gaza Strip, Palestine, on Friday 17.10.2025.

This rare fishing catch happened several days after the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, following the genocide, famine and destruction war which was carried out by the Israeli occupation forces on the Gaza Strip for more than 2 years, since the 07th October 2023, with over than 67,900 civilians – 80% of them women and children – have been brutally killed, and over 180,000 Palestinians have been wounded, half of them severely, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

According to the United Nations, over 92% of homes and infrastructure was destroyed or damaged in the Gaza Strip (United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22.01.2025); and also according to the United Nations, nine out of every ten residents of Gaza (90% of the population), numbering 2.1 million people, fled their homes and were displaced at least once during the two-year genocide war (United Nations Palestine, 08.10.2025).

The whale shark was butchered for food on spot, and meat was distributed on spot, at Khan Younis Beach, Southern Gaza Strip, Palestine, on Friday 17.10.2025.

Whale Shark Records in Palestine

Whale shark records in Palestine are rare. The first record dates back to April 2006, when a whale shark was rescued near the Tantura Beach, Carmel Coast, North Palestine, Eastern Mediterranean Sea (Khalaf, 2007c, 2012c).
Two other records are coming from the Palestinian Red Sea Coast: The first is of a dead whale shark near Um Al-Rashrash (Eilat) Beach, South Palestine; the second is of a whale shark swimming in Palestinian waters, Gulf of Aqaba, North Red Sea (Khalaf, 2007d, 2012c).

The catch of the whale shark off Khan Younis Beach, Gaza Strip in October 2025, is only the second record from the Palestinian Mediterranean Coast, and only the fourth record from the entire Mediterranean Sea.

Most likely, the presence of whale sharks in the Mediterranean Sea is due to their migration from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, the so-called Lessepsian migration.

The species was first identified in April 1828 when a 4.6-meter specimen was harpooned in Table Bay, South Africa. It was later described by British military doctor and zoologist Andrew Smith, who published a more detailed account in 1849.
The name “Whale Shark” reflects both the creature’s size – comparable to that of a whale – and its method of feeding, which involves filtering food from seawater in a manner similar to Baleen Whales.

أسماء عامية عربية للقرش الحوت : البتان (فلسطين والأردن) ، النهم (رأس الخيمة) ، الرقطة أي الرقطاء (دُبي) ، قطو أي القط (الإمارات) ، العضل (الإمارات) ، زيفا (دهب في مصر) ، النمر الصالح (مصر) ، البهلول (منطقة البحر الأحمر في مصر) ، بابا شلينغي (سواحل كينيا العربية) والذي جاء من الأسطورة التي تقول إن الله تعالى ألقى شِلن (مال أفريقي) على أسماك القرش الحوت ثم تحول جلدها إلى بقع بيضاء .

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